



Ah, for the days of common sense, absolutes and playground justice!

Almost everyone by now has heard about the 6-year-old boy charged with sexual harassment for kissing a girl at school. In times past, this act probably would have been ignored or the child gently reprimanded by an adult in charge. At the very worst, the boy would have tried it another time or two and eventually met up with a feisty peer to set him straight about "appropriate behavior" in the elementary years. When I was a kid, learning the lessons of life was a lot simpler!

Robert Fulgum said all he ever needed to know, he learned in kindergarten. For me, it was the playground.

Across from my house today is a small park that in my youth would have had a baseball game, a fully populated set of swings and a line queuing up for both much of the day. It now sits empty most of the time. Today's life lessons are learned in a more complex setting and with what must seem to most kids like ever-changing rules. Have we advanced? I'm not sure.

The playground was where we learned a lot about life, competition, coexisting with peers and to respect authority. There was a time when conflict was settled, behavior validated and pecking order determined more simply. This was not Fielding's "Lord of the Flies" nor a Darwinian jungle of natural selection, but well-structured life laboratory, not under the constant watchful eye of

an adult, but always operating with the fear that unchecked escalation of kiddie conflict meant final justice from a grown-up with absolute authority. It wasn't always pretty, but it seemed to work and the rules were clear or quickly learned.

The sandlot and playground also shaped many careers, some in sports, most not. Unlike organized children's sports today, where everyone plays and outfielders pirouette while dreaming of the stage or sowing the seeds of future laboratory discovery, the sandlot was mercifully quick in selecting those who could play from those who couldn't. Being the one not chosen sent some kids home to pursue other things, to claim their fame and recognition on a future stage, but it also fired the will of others to work harder to succeed in their chosen sport. Neither suffered long or much and rewards were meaningful and often life-building. Today, while it seems our children still play for themselves, many also play for their parents' lost dreams and fantasies or to fulfill abstract contracts of commitment or social status they never quite understand.

The playground molded our ability to deal with conflict. We quickly learned the pros and cons of confrontation, negotiation and avoidance. Once, after taunting an older teenage bully by the name of "Weasel" Modzjlewski about his attitude (and serious class II skeletal deformity) from a safe dis-

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tance and with ample manpower by my side, I learned he had put a contract out on my head. The next month or so had me constantly looking over my shoulder and mentally girding myself for the eventual confrontation. The showdown came and went quickly one day as I got off the bus. Weasel walked past without a word, having long forgotten the incident that for me had defined my life and thoughts for the previous six weeks. For him, it had been just another day at the playground, but for me, it had been a crash course on survival under pressure, thinking on my feet and preparing for every contingency! Today, the same initial confrontation would have a far different outcome. Within seconds of the initial volley, one or two peer mediators would have arrived quickly on the scene. Weasel and I would have been brought together and asked to share our feelings and negotiate our differences. Had we not been able to stem our adrenaline surges and seek neutral territory, we would have been relegated to adult intervention focusing on my need for sensitivity toward my adversary's appearance and his need to resolve conflict differently. Appropriate reporting, consideration of family dynamics and follow-up by a school counseling professional would have rounded out the experience!

As I reflect on our little 6-year-old, I wonder how his experience will shape his young psyche.

Did he learn the inappropriateness of his act, or will he be forever confused by the swirling morass of publicity, arguing adults, the abstract world of political correctness, and more media attention than he ever dreamed of? The last image of him I recall was as guest of honor at a parade for an auto race. The smile on his ice cream covered face suggested he made it through all of it unscathed!

I worry more about the kids we never hear about. What have we shown the athlete who always plays, but never tries or cares? Or the children who grow up believing that differences are best solved by an impartial third party? Can a 6-year-old understand concepts that continue to be debated by the most educated scions of our civilization? And what of the teens whose lack of adult authority, simple boundaries and absolutes send them to the comfort of gangs?

Call me old fashioned, call me naive, but I think the rusting swing sets, weeds and cracked pavement mean something more has left our playgrounds than our children.

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